

MAQBOOL FIDA HUSAIN

Gouri R.

‘To my mind the most interesting thing in art is the personality of the artist; and if that is singular, I am willing to excuse a thousand faults,’ says Somerset Maugham in *The Moon and Sixpence*.

What do you think of the artist who completes an elaborate painting—and washes it back to white again? Three generations of Indians have found Maqbool Fida Husain quirky and irresistibly provocative. Star and showman that he is, Husain has fuelled that interest with regular exhibitions of eccentricity and caprice. With his striking features framed by a bushy halo (now a venerable white), Husain is a photographer’s delight. He sparks the kind of controversy the press loves to blow up. He has only to go barefoot to hit the headlines.

Husain walks tall. He has lived to see himself a runaway success in the art market. In fact his market savviness is more astounding than his tireless invention.

Honours, awards and acclaim have not lagged behind either. Great moments include his exhibition at the Sao Paolo Biennale in Brazil (1971) where he was a special guest with Pablo Picasso. He even won the Golden Bear in Berlin (1967) for his documentary ‘Through the Eyes of a Painter’.

Husain has been more reviled and disparaged than any other Indian artist. He is accused of making his public see the emperor in clothes that simply do not exist. He once strewed the walls of an art gallery with kilometres of white homespun cloth and the floors with newspapers, to signify serenity above and shocks below. As early as 1968 Husain decided to turn painting into performance. At the Shridharani Art Gallery, New Delhi, large evening crowds watched as he worked on six canvasses—simultaneously!

At age eighty he declared that movie star Madhuri Dixit had ‘stirred his instincts’ as she cavorted in the rollicking blockbuster *Hum Apke Hain Kaun*. Not content with extolling her as the Eternal Woman in serigraphs, he painted the star on a live horse as well.

With his love of music it was natural for Husain to contemporize the tradition of raga painting. Steeped as he is in Urdu poetry, Husain’s romantic metaphors described paintings as fragments of music, and the art of painting as the orchestration of notes struck upon the artist’s personality. But who could predict that the man would stand in packed concert halls and transpose the music of Bhimsen Joshi onto canvas visuals? When Yesudas sang the ‘*Vatapi ganapatim*—a popular composition in Raga Hamsadhwam”—Husain accompanied him with paint and brush. The elephant god appeared, not on the usual mouse, but riding a horse!

For Husain painting is not a silent act in a sealed room. It is an exuberant happening in an intense present. Sharing gives a keen edge to his own enjoyment. Through the prolific years his lines, colours and imagery have remained bold, even brazen. Husain’s modernism is neither derived nor abstruse. It strives for a primal simplicity. It taps the icon, symbol and sign—at times flat and plain, at other times bristling—with subtle

undertones. He has the child's innocence and guile. His poetic expressionism can make you taste every shade of feeling as if for the first time.

Husain does not have ten generations of artists behind him. His career choice was a revolutionary step for the small-town, middle-class boy. All the same, he claimed a vast and resplendent heritage. His myth-making convinces us because it accommodates the religious, social and cultural traditions of this ancient subcontinent. Glitch and folk are as much grist to his mill as are the classical modes of the West or the Far East. From the stark to the subtle, from the mundane to the mystic—Husain spurns nothing along the way. He is as much at home with the haute monde in Paris as with the hawkers in Pandharpur. Born into a civilization which revels in pluralism, he retains the particular even as he amplifies the universal within. That is how he places Mariam beside Krishna, and turns 'The Night before Christmas' into an Indian parable.

Husain has a sense of humour. You can see it in all his work—from satire in some of his British Raj paintings to the mischief of his multi-mood umbrellas. Or it can be a chatty moment, a naughty glint as he asks you, 'Look at my nose and chin. Don't I look like a Maratha chieftain?'

A few years ago I found myself in an old house in Calcutta. As my eyes adjusted to the dust and dark, quite suddenly, I saw rough lines writhing on the wall before me. Scratched on impulse may be—with the quick charge and sure fire of the cave painters of prehistory. Horses! Creatures of light and grace. Flaunting their power and strength. They bucked and reared and pranced and stamped. In that moment, before Husain's horses, nature, memory and myth become one.

At his best Husain does not present an experience. He plunges you headlong into the act as it happens—here, now, and always—with an insouciance undimmed through the greying years.

A BIOSCOPE, A STEED AND A SKETCHBOOK

Human faces—I wonder if there is anything in the world more fascinating than the human face. Among the millions of people who have lived on earth for thousands of years, no two faces are exactly alike. And therefore, are you surprised to know that my earliest memories are of faces? Faces of persons I knew and persons I didn't know except as faces drawn in my mind?

Some of those faces live and breathe. Others are like flat line drawings. Even now, when I see an interesting face in a newspaper or magazine, I cut it out and keep it.

My earliest recollections are effaces bending over me when I was one or two years old. By age four I was drawing the faces I saw at home, on the street, and in the market-place. By the time I was five, I was sketching all the time, scribbling wherever I could—on paper, books, wall and floor. My favourite models were faces which had something extra on them like glasses, moustaches or beards.

I think my obsession with faces was not due to the variety in their features. It was their expressions that intrigued me. You see, even the same face does not always look the same. So many feelings fade in and out and chase one another ever changingly.

I was born in 1915 in Pandharpur, Maharashtra. The town is the home of Lord Panduranga Vithala, or Vithoba as he is lovingly —'known. Though born in a Muslim family, I did not feel different from the rest of the townsmen who were Hindus. It was because in language and lifestyle we were really Maharashtrians. My *mami* (maternal aunt) sold vegetables in the market, wearing the *nauvari* (nine yards) saree. We spoke Marathi at home, not Urdu. Our family certainly knew no Persian or Arabic. Vithoba was not a stranger to us. When we swore in the name of God we said '*devaachi shapat*' as the Hindus did. Deva referred to God, to Vithoba in fact. We did not say '*Khuda ki kasam*' as the Urdu speaking Muslims did.

My mother, Zainab, died when I was two years old. I had fallen seriously ill and her desperate prayer was that her life should be taken and mine spared. That is exactly what happened. Though alive I counted myself extremely unfortunate. Can anyone make up for the loss of a mother? I don't even have a picture of her. She refused to get herself photographed. In those days people were afraid of the camera. They thought it cast an evil eye and shortened life. Sadly, I have nothing which remotely resembles or reminds me of my mother. She is just a name to me, not even a memory.

Soon after mother's death my family moved from Pandharpur to Indore in Madhya Pradesh. Four years later my father married again. I distinctly and vividly remember my father's wedding. And my stepmother came to live with us.

I did not resent lather's marriage. But a strange woman coming to live in our home—I never got used to that. I saw it as an intrusion. To be fair to her, I must say she was a good person—she tried to be kind to me. More than once she came to my rescue when lather got angry with me. She often stopped him from beating me. But I could never feel close to her.

My father Fida Husain worked as an accountant in a textile mill. He had a stable job and an income of two hundred rupees per month. I think that is why a traditional Muslim family like my stepmother's gave her in marriage to him.

On the whole I had a happy childhood. There was no dearth of playmates as I had four sisters and four brothers. None of them showed any interest in painting. In fact no one in my family had ever wanted to paint. But they had other uses. My eldest step-sister Dilbar was my most frequent model for portraits. She died before the age of thirty. We were very close to each other and I still miss her.

I studied in Indore High School up to class nine. In between I was sent to a boarding school in Baroda for religious instruction in Islam. Abbas Tyabji, a disciple of Gandhiji, was the patron of that school. The Tyabji family members were educated upper-class folk, and opinion-makers in Baroda. They were fiercely patriotic, giving up their wealth and comfortable lifestyle to join the freedom struggle. Though that school taught Islamic studies, the uniform we wore was pure homespun *khadi*.

When I look back, I realize that the nationalist movement also meant Hindu-Muslim unity. We were brought up on those ideals. That is why, when our country was partitioned into India and Pakistan, our family never thought of emigration. We felt we belonged to the place where we had lived for generations.

For me the choice was very clear. I could never go to Pakistan where my painting would be banned. In fact even in Indore where I grew up in a typical orthodox Muslim

community, there was a hue and cry about my painting. ‘This is not right. What you are doing is against our religion,’ said the ustadhs and the mullahs.

But my father, strict as he was in many things, never smoking or touching alcohol, would not stop me from painting. He encouraged me and defended me. He had progressive views. In those days no woman could go out without a *burkha*. My father was the first to take his wife to the movies without that burkha. Finally the neighbourhood came to accept his ways. Father was a very kind and generous man, the sort who would rush to help anyone who needed it. He had an open house and welcomed everyone. He was loved by the whole community. And so they decided to overlook his ‘whims’.

My passion for painting became so overwhelming that I lost interest in everything else. My hand kept moving on paper, making shapes and patterns. I painted on broken bits of crockery and on the floor, imitating the traditions of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Shireen, my stepmother, came from Gujarat. That is how I went there during holidays and was exposed to different scenes, customs and people. I used to carry a sketch pad with me always. Whenever something caught my fancy, I would whip it out and draw feverishly. I would sit on the street day-dreaming and suddenly I would see a face which galvanized me into activity. I drew all kinds of people. Sometimes I would ‘set up’ my subject. I would beg my cousin to dress like a fakir and paint him. I liked to walk round the streets and the narrow lanes, making sketches of buses and trams, tongas and carts, and people engaged in various activities. I did not seek gardens and parks so much though I did cycle to find visuals for my landscape painting.

There was no one to look at my paintings, no one to make any comment, favourable or unfavourable. My father was merely indulgent. He was not a connoisseur. Yet I went on painting. I even sold my school books to buy paints.

As a child I read a lot. I was attracted to ideas.

That is why all kinds of religious thought and philosophy interested me. My feeling for poetry was fanned by my uncle Zakir Ali Zia. He was a poet himself. He wrote about the human condition, about the plight of man, not romantic poetry. His *nazms* (a form of poetry) had a hymnal quality.

At the Indore school nothing interested me except literature. I also enjoyed learning languages. What drove me to study Gujarati, Hindi and Marathi (and later Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu) was my love of their literature. I never did believe in degrees and diplomas, not even in painting. That is why I rejected father’s suggestion that I should join the J. J. School of Art in Bombay. What its final year students were doing, I could do without attending a single class.

As a child I wrote poems in Hindi. Later I began to write in English. How thrilled I was when my English poems were published in Switzerland! I was an adult then, but my joy was as great as a child’s. I studied only up to class nine, dropping out of school after that. But I did write that book of poems!

If you have real passion, you can do anything.

Though I never paid attention to studies I was very popular in school. The children liked my paintings. They had fun watching me draw caricatures of teachers. At age eleven I could draw portraits. At school functions I would draw special pictures on the

blackboard. For instance, I drew an enormous head of Mahatma Gandhi on his birthday. I made models of buildings which won prizes in competitions. They were elaborate affairs made of cardboard, painted over and fitted with tiny lights in every room. I made tableaux inside and within the compound—of people, animals, trees and plants.

I was a very quiet child. I had no time for chatter. My hands were always busy painting, modelling or making something. But I did play games—mostly football and tennis. I devised my own kind of squash by hitting the ball against the wall of my room. I organized athletic events in school—running, high jump and so on. I read everything I could about the Olympic Games and imagined that we were world champions on the school playground.

Like me, my father had many interests. Music was one of them. He played a Japanese instrument called the Tesho koto, probably purchased from a wandering Japanese tradesman. It had strings—some to be struck with a plastic plectrum, some to be finger-tapped. Father did not ‘perform’. He played to enjoy himself, trying out old tunes, making up his own *dhun* (tune) as he went along. I tried to play, but I never got the hang of it. But I came to love music because the Holkar kings were great patrons of classical *gharana* music, and there were frequent performances. The Indore College too held regular concerts. That is how I got to hear some of the best *dhrupad* and *khyal* (forms of Hindustani music) singers.

Father was also very fond of the theatre. He would take us to see the famous Marathi plays put up by the popular drama companies of those times. I used to be entranced by their spectacles and songs. And Ramlila! It was not street theatre at all but an unforgettable experience. The characters of the old myth took fantastic shapes. It was more than real. It was magical. Much later those shapes and forms urged me to do a serious reading of the Ramayana. I painted them—those gods and heroes and demons. My father was liberal about these things. He did not object to my involvement with the myths of another religion.

In those days travelling shows were very popular. One of them was the ‘bioscope’. A man installed a box in the town or village square and loudly invited the people to take a peep inside. He had an amusing patter. ‘*Dilli ka darbar dekho, Viceroy Curzon ko dekho*’ (‘See the court in Delhi. Look at Viceroy Curzon’). The box had a peep-hole. Through it you could see action pictures. The box was cranked to make a picture-strip move across the frame very swiftly. This created the illusion of motion.

I was so intrigued by it that I constructed my own ‘peep box’—hand crank and all. I drew a strip of six to eight drawings, rather like animation pictures, or those you see in flip books. My invention was a tremendous success and after this I got hooked on photography. We were not rich. But father said, ‘The boy is creative; let him do what he likes.’ He bought me an Agfa camera for five rupees. This interest continued in adulthood. I learnt to compose and to develop my own pictures.

As a child I was always looking for unusual scenes, unique angles. One day the congregation at the mosque caught my eye. I climbed a tree nearby and took pictures of the praying crowds. I was caught and thrashed by my uncle for this ‘sacrilege’. I had been shooting, instead of praying like a good boy.

Father might not have considered this a great offence. But once he too thrashed me hard. I was very fond of silk socks and stole a pair from my uncle's shop. When father found out, my punishment came behind closed doors and not all my stepmother's entreaties could stop it.

My obsession with cinema began at that time. In those days middle-class families frowned on novel-reading and film-going. We were allowed to see only one or two films a year. I used to long for those rare occasions. I got to see a few more when my cousin began to come with me.

At first films were silent, which meant that the screen figures did not speak. English films had sub-titles. But for Hindi films two men stood on either side of the screen. One provided music, the other a running commentary! He would not only narrate the story but speak the dialogues too. I saw the first film ever made in India—Dada Saheb came to town,

Phalke's *Raja Harischandra*. Then came V. Shantaram's popular hit *Ayodhyachya Raja* with Durga Khote as the heroine.

Whenever a film a man went round the streets on a tonga loudly proclaiming its name and promising marvels and miracles. He distributed illustrated pamphlets. There was always a scramble for them. I used to collect them and also any film magazine I came across. One, called *Mauj Maza*, was in Gujarati. I devoured it from cover to cover and cut out pictures for my collection. This was—the beginning of my more serious interest in film-making techniques and direction. I did get to make a few documentaries eventually.

Strangely enough, it was a film which had the greatest impact on my pursuit of painting—a Dutch film on Rembrandt, with that remarkable character actor Charles Laugh ton in the lead. I don't think I can explain how profoundly moved I was by Rembrandt's ordeals through fire. I wanted to have that same magnificent obsession, that same self-transcending commitment. I too longed to be a portrait painter, not to draw pink cheeks and classic profiles, but to lay bare the souls of real people.

As I grew older I got to know more and more about the great painters of the world in Europe, the United States, China and Japan—about Matisse and Renoir, Picasso and Paul Klee. But my adoration of Rembrandt continues to this day. Why? Because I see in him a tremendous feeling of humanity for humanity. His spirit is so intense; he shows you not just the face but the pain which racks the soul within. Take his painting 'The Nightwatch', which commands the rapt gaze of thousands of visitors at the Rijks Museum, Amsterdam. The first time I stood before it, I cried my heart out. It is the only painting in the world which has that effect on me every time I see it. The subject—what is it? Something as commonplace as the city fathers. Nothing sentimental or sad. It doesn't show anything like death or the crucifixion. But when you stand before it, you are in a state of ecstasy, a spiritual bliss that may never come to you in temple or mosque.

That is the power of painting.

And the way in which the artist has tackled the areas of the canvas,—the work on it, the thought in it—is beyond the human.

In those days I went to the mosque regularly. There was a time when I prayed eight hours a day and learnt passage after passage of the Koran by heart. That was when my stepmother's father decided I should become a *maulvi* (priest). I was seven or eight, too

young to protest, too young even to know what it meant. But the training in a Baroda boarding school lasted only a year. During that time I was not allowed to paint. I broke that rule—I painted on the floor, on cups and plates and dishes. A frenzied strength made me defy the elders and break free.

In fact, in class nine I announced that I could not continue in school. I was no good at studies, and school-going interfered with my painting. Father realized he had no choice; he could not force me to attend school. But he must have been extremely worried because there really was no hope of making any kind of living through painting. Not in those days. Certainly not in our limited small-town, middle-class world.

My uncle was a maulvi. He did not object to my painting *per se*, he only felt it was an useless activity. ‘Since he won’t study, let him learn a trade. All this dreaming and drawing is no good,’ he said. And because I had skill in drawing it was decided that I could become a good tailor. I could draw and cut out cloth to be stitched!

Would you believe it, father actually took me to a tailor and left me in his shop. Now the tailor had his own views on training apprentices. He gave me needle and thread and asked me to sew. But where was the cloth? ‘No need,’ said the tailor. ‘Just imagine you have the cloth in your hand, and make the motions of pushing the needle in and pulling it out. And mind, I want neat, even stitches. Don’t get the thread tangled either.’ He wanted me to do the pushing and the pulling for a week from morning to evening so that, when I was given a garment, I would have become an expert in smooth sewing. With that, the tailor turned his attention to cutting a lovely piece of foreign cloth for a suit. During the British days, suits were the habitual formal wear and this tailor was fussy about standards. He had a reputation to maintain, you see.

The tailor was a big hulking man with fierce moustaches which bristled at the slightest signs of slacking. Do you blame me for quitting his shop after three- days? Luckily, father turned out to be sympathetic.

You might wonder how, in a family like mine and in a small town like Indore, I got to learn about the painters of the world. There was the town library which had a decent collection of books on the subject, with lots of illustrations. I got to know the Impressionists and the Abstract Expressionists. I learnt about cubism and surrealism. A college-going friend took me to the college library. That is where I came across my first history of art, written by John Ruskin. It was not heavy reading at all. I turned each page with eagerness and anticipation.

After reading Ruskin and books on the modern art movement in the West, I became conscious of being part of a whole stream, a stream with goal and direction. My work had never been abstract, nor had it been realistic. I was drawing faces and portraits of real people, but they were not detailed and finished likenesses. My strokes were bold. I sought to capture the essence rather than the externals of anything I painted, whether face or scene. I never liked naturalistic painting. It seemed too much like copying to me.

But I was aware of commonplace romance and realism in portraiture. Ramachandra, Maharaja Yeshwantrao Holkar’s special photographer, had a dozen paintings of Ravi Varma. I was a child of ten when I saw them. Nowadays people say Ravi Varma is a pioneer, that he has a place in the history of Indian art. I don’t agree. He was a calendar artist pure and simple.

I was twelve when I heard the romantic story of a French painter who was commissioned to paint the portrait of the Maharaja. The artist made one condition. ‘I have to live with the Maharaja in the palace and observe him for two years before I make a single stroke with the brush.’

‘Done,’ said the king. That is how a Frenchman got to experience the unimagined splendours of the lifestyle of Indian royalty for two whole years. The portrait he did was displayed at the town hall. As I gazed at it I too dreamed of painting the Maharaja one day..and of palace luxuries...

The glimpses we common folk had of kingly ways were quite dazzling. On Dussehra the king rode on his state elephant round the town streets. I don’t know what was more gorgeous—the king or the elephant. Their silks and jewels made them both shine golden in the sun. There was a *mela* on the *maidan*, at which I distinctly remember painted clay dolls being sold. We bought those dolls each year, and I gradually acquired a fine collection.

Muharram was a very important day in Indore. It was not seen as a Muslim event. Hindus were equally enthusiastic participants. The Maharaja himself joined the procession every year.

To Muslims, Muharram is not a festival of rejoicing. It is an occasion for mourning the martyrdom of the Prophets grandson Hazrat Husain, who was killed in battle. On the tenth day, Muslims would take out *taziyas* (mobile tombs crafted with bamboo, coloured gilt paper and cloth) in a procession as is customary, and immerse them in the river. The Maharaja’s *taziya* was the grandest of all—a colossal affair, two storeys high!

The making of these *taziyas* was a specialized art. In fact the huge ones took a whole year to make. As soon as they were immersed in water, the craftsmen began to make new *taziyas* for the following year. I used to go and watch them being made. It was a family trade for artisans who had come from north Asia to settle in Indore.

Today there is no time either to make such *taziyas*, or to go and watch them being crafted with that delicate sureness of touch.

During Muharram they also made huge papier mache horses and painted them. They represented the steed named Duldu on which Husain rode to the wars and was martyred. You know that I am known as the painter of horses. All my life I have drawn horses. My fascination for those glorious creatures began with childhood memories of horses in the festival procession. They too were taken to the river, sprinkled with water and brought back to be stabled for the next year’s show.

There were no communal riots in Indore. I heard about them for the first time only when I came to Bombay. Our *gully* had Muslims and Hindus living cheek by jowl. We visited each other and invited each other to celebrate Id and Diwali. There were exchanges of greetings and sweets.

My childhood years were a significant era for India in its struggle for freedom from the British Raj. There were many Englishmen living in the princely state of Indore. I hated them—their raw complexion, insolent gait and haughty ways. Later I was to staunchly support the Satyagraha movement, though I was never an active participant in politics at any time.

In Indore the British Resident was known to be spying on the Maharaja. Fawning Indians got rich very quickly, before our eyes. They were rewarded with titles and honours. Their sons came to school in posh cars, dressed like princes, and threw their weight around. I think I began to hate snobbery and social disparity because of those experiences. I saw the white men driving past in stately carriages and cars. People cringed before them and bowed to them. Some even fell flat on their faces.

When I painted the scene of Maharaja Yeshwantrao Holkar welcoming the Viceroy at the railway station, it was from a real image etched on my mind as a child. His son objected to the picture of the Maharaja humbling himself before the white man. But that was exactly what he had done. The princes of India, by and large, did demean themselves for favours and friendship from the British and passively allowed the British to establish control over the Indian states.

An illustrated weekly called the *Riyasat* published in Delhi, described the nawabs, rajas and their doings. It was my first exposure to such things. I began also to follow the stirring events of the Independence movement.

Our home in Indore was a typical joint family establishment. There were our parents and grandfather, and grandfather's brother and his family, all living in the same small house. Drawing room? We had no such thing. You straightaway entered the bedroom where we spread our carpets and slept in a row at night. When these were rolled up and put aside, it became a living room. Father alone had his *palang* (a bedstead with curtains).

We had to make do with a single bathroom at the back. There was a kitchen too where simple meals were prepared by my stepmother. It was *rotis* mostly, and a *salan* (curry) with a little meat and lots of gravy. On Sundays, father would go to the market, choose the meat and spices carefully. He himself would cook gourmet *biryabis* for us and invite others to join the feast. Now you know why, though father had a good, stable-income, he had to do with a bicycle for transport. He could never get rich.

My interest in girls began very early. I was only ten when I began to carry a small mirror in my pocket. This was for the express purpose of looking at a girl in the neighbourhood. Whenever she passed by, I would hold the mirror in the palm of my hand, angled to catch her face in a close-up without her suspecting it. I continued getting infatuated with one girl after another.

This was perhaps because I had no mother. I knew father loved me. But he was an authority to be feared and obeyed. I rebelled sometimes. But our training was to submit to our elders, to say 'yes', and to be very quiet around the house.

I thus found myself drawn towards women. This has continued all my life. I see woman as the image of *shakti*. Women have the real power. Even Islam assigns an important place to woman. Wasn't the Prophets daughter Fatima the first to reach heaven after him?

A child needs security and unquestioning love. I got both from my grandfather. I knew that whatever happened, he would always be on my side. I would tell everyone very proudly '*Mein dada se paida hua.*' ('I was born of my grandfather'). I slept next to him at night and he kept a constant eye on me during the day. He brought lunch to school everyday. We sat under a tree and ate it together. At home no one dared to point a finger at me because he was such a staunch champion of my cause.

Once my uncle got very angry with me because I had scribbled on his books. He began to thrash me. My yells brought grandfather to the scene. ‘Stop it at once,’ he thundered to my uncle. ‘Don’t you dare touch him. My grandson has every right to do whatever he likes in this house.’

Grandfather spoilt me shamelessly. I would pick at my food and say, ‘I can’t eat this. I don’t like this curry.’ Instead of admonishing me he would take me to the bazaar and buy me the food I liked. He bought me many toys, even imported cars and trains. How many times have I run to him, put my little hand over his finger, and walked down the street, both of us perfectly happy in each other’s company!

Grandfather had a long white beard. He wore a black cap and a long *achkan*. He no more Urdu than my father did, but he had an air of command and a native shrewdness which everyone respected.

I remember the day he died. I was playing outside—ignorant, as only a child can be, of the impending calamity. They would have left me out of it, but grandfather wanted to see me before he died. Everyone went out leaving us alone together. I saw his pain-lined face. A single tear dropped from the corner of his eye. That was all. He could not speak. With a trembling hand he took out a ten rupee note from under his pillow and put it in my hand. He grew still. Soon the others came in and took me out of the room. I did not know he died with me by his side. He was seventy years old.

It took me some time to realize just what grandfather’s death meant. Everything seemed to be finished for me. Dazed and grief-stricken I avoided everyone at home. I couldn’t bear to stay indoors. I spent the days wandering aimlessly or playing with the neighbourhood children in the lane.

And so the years passed until I was seventeen years old. That is when I went to Bombay, thinking that in the big city I could make a living as a painter. I had won a gold medal in an Indore exhibition. It gave me hope. Almost as soon as I landed in Bombay, I sold a landscape. Someone saw me painting on the street. He liked it and bought it on the spot. For ten rupees! It was not a small sum. A household could be run on 20 rupees in those days. I began to go from door to door offering to do portraits. People did take a chance with me and paid me as much as fifteen to twenty rupees for a portrait.

I could not continue in this easy way because people did not want me to paint them as I wanted to paint them. ‘No, no, no!’ they would say. ‘Paint me fair and lovely. I want a glowing skin and a Greek nose!’

So I decided to do cinema hoardings. Of course it was not fine art. It was painting likenesses again. But I had always been enchanted by the ‘Talkies’. This was as close as I could get to realizing my ambition of becoming a film director!

For months I worked at cinema hoardings, mixed paint, applied the background and filled in the faces. My work was mostly in the red-light area near Grant Road. I had no home. But at seventeen I could sleep on the sidewalks. I was paid 6 annas per day. I got rice for 6 paise. The curry or the dal came free.

Once when I had no other work, I got free meals in the *dhaba* that I used to frequent in those days. It was called ‘Play House’ and was at the Grant Road junction, very close to the theatres. The *dhaba* owner’s old mother refused to be photographed. I sat in a corner

of the eatery and painted her without her knowledge. I got lunch and dinner for it. I did not have the 2 paise for the morning cup of tea.

I got married in 1941 and had to get a job that would pay. I began to design nursery furniture and toys for Parsis and other Westernized Indians. I introduced designs from Indian folklore to people who knew only ‘Little Bo-peep’ and ‘Baa baa black sheep’. Soon I had seven or eight men working under me. But this was not what I wanted to do with my life.

The year India got her independence; my struggles too bore some fruit. I held my first exhibition of painting. I was thirty-two years old.

In all those years in Bombay I had never met or fraternized with other artists. I had seen Raza and Souza. Amrita Shergil was there for her exhibition, but she looked like an inaccessible princess. I used to stand before the works of other artists for hours on end.

It was at my 1947 exhibition that the Progressive Artists of Bombay became aware of me for the first time. ‘Husain? Who’s he?’ said they, and invited me to join their group.

That was the beginning of contemporary art in India. At that time Indian artists thought they had to paint either in the Royal Academy style of the West or join the Bengal Revivalists in a self-conscious Indianness. We wanted to develop a live, original and authentic language of modern art. We collaborated with likeminded Progressives in Delhi and Calcutta to fight our opponents. And yes, it took us ten years, but we demolished the old rotting system and cleared the air.

We were blackballed by the schools of art. The professors warned their students to have nothing to do with the Progressives. Some blamed us for destroying great Indian traditions with our ‘Western’ notions.

True, we were influenced by the art movements in the West. But our inspiration came from India. Our work was truly Indian in form, nature and spirit. Scholars like Ananda Coomaraswamy helped us a lot with their writings on Indian art. We refused to be realistic, ornamental or imitative.

What a fight we put up together! But that togetherness is quite gone. We bicker with each other now. Success has divided us.

I was going to talk only about my childhood. But I *had* to tell you about my long years of struggles in Bombay.

My childhood dreams and passions urged me to continue despite setbacks. It took me thirty years to mount my first exhibition in the city. In all those years, never once did I yield to despair. I kept on painting though I had no chance of showing my work to others. The thought of giving up never crossed my mind.

I am eighty years old now. I have seen thought and felt much through many experiences, sweet and sour. I have tried my hand at several things. Some came out better than I expected, others failed.

I have no regrets. I can watch a procession down on Cuffe Parade from the posh block where I live now, with the same tingling sensations which delighted me so long ago, as •when watching the beautiful taziyas swaying on the shoulders of the Muharram mourners as they went down the road to the river.